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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KCOR](#) [KPKO](#) [MO](#)  
SUBJECT: MOROCCO'S MILITARY: ADEQUATE, MODERNIZING, BUT  
FACING BIG CHALLENGES

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4  
(a) and (b).

11. (C) Summary: The Moroccan Royal Armed Forces (FAR) are modernizing but remain weighed down by long-standing problems. King Mohammed VI, who in 1999 inherited a military in need of professionalization, has implemented some needed reforms, but much remains to be done. Civilian control, if ascribed to the person of the King, is complete, but there is no real Defense Ministry. Outside the FAR, there is only a small administration. The military remains plagued by corruption, an inefficient bureaucracy, low levels of education in the ranks, periodic threats of radicalization of some of its soldiers, political marginalization, and the deployment of most of its forces in the Western Sahara. There have been some indications of pending changes in the leadership. In general, the U.S. and Morocco share a robust military relationship with prospects for even closer ties in the future. The health of the relationship is evident by increased U.S.-Moroccan military training exercises and Morocco's purchase of sophisticated weapons from the U.S. to include 24 F-16s this year. We anticipate that the U.S.-Moroccan military relationship will continue to flourish but Morocco's ability to absorb its new high-end military purchases and restrictions on high quality Moroccan information sharing with our attaches represent two challenges ahead. This mission-coordinated report draws heavily on valuable reporting and analysis from the embassy's military components, the Defense Attache Office and the Office of Security Cooperation. End Summary.

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All the King's Men  
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12. (C) As Commander-in-Chief of the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces and Minister of Defense, King Mohammed VI maintains a highly centralized role over the military. No troop movements, exercises, or even travel of officers domestically or abroad happens without the King's approval. As a result of the 1971 and 1972 coup attempts by the Moroccan Army and Air Force respectively, the Palace increased control over the military, marginalized it from policy making, and restricted its interaction with foreign military interlocutors and the press. The Alaouite dynasty depends upon, among other things, a strong military, the leadership of which, however, must remain sufficiently docile so as not to arouse suspicions of disloyalty. The only civilian structure responsible for the FAR is not a Defense Ministry but rather an entity under the Prime Minister responsible for the Administration of the National Defense. It is headed by Minister-delegate Abderrahmane Sbair, whose role is essentially restricted to that of comptroller. As far as we can tell, political-military policy on issues such as peacekeeping appears centered in the Foreign Ministry. All other major defense matters are decided in the Palace.

13. (C) Over the past decade, Morocco has transitioned from a conscript to an all-volunteer military force of approximately 218,000 soldiers. Of the three services, the Army is dominant with approximately 175,000 personnel. There are approximately 13,000 personnel in the Air Force and 7,800 in the Navy. Though nominally subordinate within the military structure but answering directly to the King, the Gendarmerie, which consists of approximately 22,000 personnel, conducts paramilitary, royal guard, and internal and border policing missions. Though a few legacy conscripts remain in the military, professional reforms have made voluntary military service an attractive career option for Moroccans with opportunities for a steady income and some upward mobility. The average military salary for enlisted soldiers is approximately 2,000 dirhams (USD 270) per month. An officer's starting salary is approximately 6,000 dirhams (USD 850) per month. With benefits, such as free housing, these are reasonably competitive in the Moroccan context.

14. (C) The top military commanders include Military Inspector General and Army Commander, Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Abdelaziz Benanni; Operations Chief Lt Gen Boughaid Arroub; and Gendarmerie Commander Lt Gen Housni Benslimane. Benanni, who has become mired in suspicion of corruption, will reportedly be retired soon. Arroub, who came out of recent retirement, is tipped by some to succeed Benanni. Arroub, historically pro-French, appears to have become increasingly pro-U.S. in the last 5 years. Another rising star in the FAR is General Mohamed Larbi Tamdi, who is responsible for army logistics and force sustainment. There is some military staff in the Palace, likely influential, about which little is known.

15. (C) King Hassan II and his son, King Mohammed VI, have maintained the Gendarmerie as a force relatively independent from the FAR since 1972, in part as a check against a military coup. While it most visibly serves as a State Police/Highway Patrol, it has a wide range of units. Its commander, Lt Gen Benslimane, likely reports in some way directly to the King. He also leads the Moroccan National Soccer League, making him a popular figure inside and out of military circles. While there is no direct proof of Benslimane being involved in corrupt activity, low ranking Gendarmerie assigned to highway patrols are expected to pay approximately 4,000 dirhams (USD 540) to their immediate supervisors with extralegal earnings from motorists above which they can keep for themselves, according to one credible anecdote.

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Military Operations Dominated by Western Sahara  
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16. (C) The FAR is composed of over 200,000 soldiers and outclasses most militaries in Africa but has significant room for improvement. Along with concerns regarding aging equipment and an overtaxed force, the FAR is plagued by institutional corruption, leadership that will not step aside, and low morale among mid-level officers. The FAR is preoccupied with operations in the Western Sahara region with between 50 and 70 percent of its total strength deployed there at any one time. The force in Western Sahara -- a landmass roughly two thirds the size of California -- is considered to be stretched thin with a reported estimated operational readiness rate of just 40 percent. Morocco does not consider the POLISARIO -- the ethnically Sahrawi resistance based in Tindouf, Algeria, seeking to make the Western Sahara an independent state -- to be a conventional military threat. However, the FAR remains vigilant in guarding against a renewed POLISARIO insurgency effort. Morocco built a berm or sand wall along the eastern and southern borders of the Sahara in the 1980s, which effectively eliminated the POLISARIO's ability to launch hit and run raids, leading to the 1981 cease-fire, which has been fully respected. The POLISARIO continues to maintain a small, lightly armed presence at a few desert crossroads in

the small remaining part of Western Sahara outside the berm. Despite occasional expressions of concern, the GOM almost certainly is fully conscious that the POLISARIO poses no current threat that could not be effectively countered. The POLISARIO has generally refrained from classic terrorist bombings, etc. Although the specter is sometimes raised, there is no indication of any Salafist/Al Qaeda activity among the indigenous Sahrawi population.

17. (C) While the border between Morocco and Algeria is closed, and relations remain cool, we do not believe that Algeria poses an imminent conventional military threat to Morocco. Nonetheless, the FAR has contingency plans and "wargames" in training exercises for a possible Algerian attack, but the FAR does not have troops deployed along the border. Instead, the FAR remains stationed in garrisons, hundreds of kilometers away from the border, from which they could deploy in the unlikely event of an Algerian incursion into Morocco. Any confrontation between the two countries would likely take place through the proxy of the POLISARIO, which Algeria has supported materially in the past and could do so again if hostilities between Morocco and the POLISARIO recommenced.

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Peacekeeping  
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18. (C) Motivated to win over other countries to its claims to Western Sahara, Morocco is active in United Nations (UN), engages in peacekeeping activities, and occasionally sends troops to assist friendly countries. Morocco is an experienced contributor to UN peacekeeping efforts, deploying to countries like Angola, Bosnia, Cambodia, Haiti and Somalia. It currently has over 1,500 peacekeepers deployed to Cote d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Morocco also supports a military hospital in Kosovo under NATO command. Morocco has sent medical personnel to Niger to assist with famine relief and recently re-deployed military forces to Senegal for an annual five-month &cloud seeding8 operation for drought relief. Peacekeeping contributions in recent years have been tarnished by allegations of sexual wrongdoing in the DRC and Cote d'Ivoire.

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Corruption Remains the Single Greatest Challenge  
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19. (C) Corruption is prevalent at all levels of Moroccan society and the military is also plagued by it, particularly at the highest levels. This may partly reflect a grand bargain struck by King Hassan II following at least two nearly successful coups in the 1970's: remain loyal, and you can profit. (Those whose loyalty was in question were subject to sometimes decades of harsh imprisonment.) Credible reports indicate that Lt Gen Benanni is using his position as the Commander of the Southern Sector to skim money from military contracts and influence business decisions. A widely believed rumor has it that he owns large parts of the fisheries in Western Sahara. Benanni, like many senior military officers, has a lavish family home that was likely built with money gleaned from bribes. Leadership positions in regional sectors are a significant source of extralegal income for military leaders. There are even reports of students at Morocco's military academy paying money to increase their class standings in order to obtain positions in lucrative military postings. Command in the southern sector, i.e., Western Sahara, given the predominance of military activity there, is considered to be the most lucrative of the sectors in this regard. Because command in the southern sector is also considered critical to high level advancement in the FAR, positions there are highly sought after. Consequently, positions in this sector are often jealously "guarded" by a number of influential families in the military. The GOM seems to be looking for ways to stop corruption, especially among the formative military ranks of Colonel and below, but not much is being done to stop the

corruption in the general officer ranks.

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#### Retiring High Level Officers Also a Problem

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¶10. (C) Senior officers refusing to retire to allow younger officers to move up the ranks has become a significant problem for the FAR. Officers nearing the mandatory retirement age do not want to retire since this would mean relinquishing bribes, money-skimming, and some related sources of income. Even for those officers not on the take,<sup>8</sup> giving up government positions and paychecks is economically difficult for a sustained retirement. This "gerontocracy" problem, coupled with the King's notorious micro-management of the military has had a negative impact on the morale of mid-level military leaders.

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#### Radicalization: Under Control But Lingering Menace

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¶11. (C) Though now viewed as a minor problem, reporting suggests that small numbers of FAR soldiers remains susceptible to Islamic radicalization. The GOM first encountered this problem following the 2003 Casablanca bombings when investigators identified military members as co-conspirators. Following the bombings, the FAR undertook steps to identify extremists and implement preventative measures, such as closing prayer halls on military bases, to address the problem. Subsequently, Morocco's internal security services have identified and apprehended several military and gendarmerie personnel in other terrorist cells, some of whom had stolen weapons from their bases for terrorism. Acknowledging this threat in a speech to the armed forces in May 2008, the King stated his desire to "immunize" the armed forces from the threat of radicalization and to promote the values of tolerance and moderation in the ranks. During this same time frame the military forced 30 officers to retire early, allegedly because they were deemed potentially radical and hostile to the Government. Subsequently, the FAR removed all mosques from army bases and deployed military counterintelligence, i.e., 5th Bureau, undercover officers to monitor local "off-post" mosques for potentially radical activities. These officers refer cases to the Gendarmerie if criminal charges can be pursued.

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#### Winds of Change

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¶12. (C) Since the 1970's the military itself has been perceived as the greatest threat to the throne and internal security in Morocco, not surprising given Morocco's own history and the broader context of the coup-ridden Middle East and Africa. Of late, however, there is a general

perception that the relationship between the Palace and the FAR is beginning to change to one of greater trust. The King's growing confidence is partly signaled by a recent significant increase in military spending, particularly for modern hardware, although this is primarily a function of the GOM's perceived threat from Algeria and the fact that it is cost prohibitive at a certain point to maintain older military equipment. The GOM increased the military's operating budget to more than USD 2 billion in 2007, significantly more than in previous years. Likewise, the FAR is undergoing a significant modernization process, paying over USD 2 billion for 24 F-16 aircraft and over USD 300 million for T-6 training aircraft from the U.S. The GOM has commercially financed these transactions, thus far, but the upfront payments have come from the treasury, which has also committed to cover monthly payments. The King recently allowed armed military flights north of Ben Guerir (located approximately 200 kilometers south of Rabat), an act not permitted in the past due to the King's desire to keep the military far away from the Palace in Rabat. The GOM is also looking to make significant purchases of M-1 Abrams battle

tanks in the future.

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U.S.-Moroccan Military Relations  
Strong but Could Be Better  
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¶13. (C) In general, the U.S. and Morocco share a robust military relationship with prospects for even closer ties in the future. The health of the relationship is evidenced by increased U.S.-Moroccan military training exercises and the aforementioned military sales. Morocco has also increased its activities under a partnership arrangement with the Utah National Guard, which regularly deploys to Morocco to conduct joint training and humanitarian relief operations. We have submitted draft proposed language for the Moroccans to consider for an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and have received comments on the ACSA draft from the GOM. In the future, the Embassy hopes to see improvements in the FAR's information sharing and accessibility to military units and facilities with our Defense Attache Office. Although the FAR regularly dialogues with our attaches, quality information is lacking. The FAR also does not recognize the Embassy Attache circle, an organization of Military Attaches from various countries residing in Morocco who elect a president to discuss issues of collective concern with the FAR. It is apparent that the Palace continues to tightly control the FAR's interactions U.S. and other foreign governments.

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AFRICOM Viewed with Caution  
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¶14. (C) Previous interactions with GOM officials indicate that military leaders are opposed to AFRICOM basing a headquarters element in Morocco. However, Morocco has offered to send a military liaison officer to the AFRICOM headquarters in Germany and has offered to assist U.S.-led efforts engaging with African countries. Morocco has also approached AFRICOM representatives to solicit AFRICOM support in providing chemicals needed for their cloud-seeding operations in Senegal and providing logistics to assist with a proposed locust control program.

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (C) The Mission is optimistic that the U.S.-Moroccan military relationship will continue to improve, but there are potential speed bumps in future. We anticipate that cooperative joint training exercises will continue to occur at a robust pace, although the vast majority of this activity will likely take place in Morocco because of continued restrictions on the travel of FAR personnel. While we anticipate that the Palace will continue to modernize the military, with the notable possible acquisition of M-1 Abrams tanks, we are increasingly concerned that Morocco, not used to the high operating costs of these high end items (and other budgetary pressures) may make it increasingly difficult for the Moroccans to make payments on purchases. If payments become a problem for the GOM, this could sour relations temporarily. While we believe that there are some signs of the King's increased confidence in the FAR, we believe that the monarchy still calculates that the military represents the biggest potential threat to the crown. FAR officers will, therefore, continue to be distanced from policy making input and restricted from engaging in detailed discussions about Moroccan military strength and intentions with foreign military officers, including our attaches.

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Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>  
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